

Taking the wildness out of California's black bears



DFG photo by staff

Bear cubs learn from a sow to search for natural dens and forage for natural foods. If the sow learns bad habits from humans, she will teach it to her cubs.

Photo © William Grenfell



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A bear's forest takeout menu may include ants, trout, plants and berries, but often the most convenient option for a hungry bruin is garbage, birdseed and pet food.

By Chamois L. Andersen

California's black bears usually make a living on the best available forage offered by Mother Nature. But bears can also be tempted to go after unnatural food sources, and a free dinner left out by humans can be all too tempting. Every summer, numerous wild animals turn into urban scavengers. The reason for this unfortunate situation is that humans often fail to recognize the need to keep animals such as bears wild. It has been proven that residents and visitors to the state who practice preventative measures to avoid attracting bears have helped to decrease the number of unwanted encounters. Waiting until trash pick up day to leave garbage outside and by feeding pets indoors, for example, can mean a lot when it comes to keeping California's bears wild.

Although seeing a wild bear can be a unique and exciting experience, encountering one scavenging in a garbage can, or meandering around the campsite grill or picnic table can be a bit unnerving. This type of bear and its resulting patterned behavior is quite different from the one a person might see fishing alongside a mountain stream, or foraging on berries in an open meadow.

"Problem bears are the

ones that learn to associate an easy food supply with humans and developed areas," said Sonke Mastrup, deputy director of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) who oversees wildlife education programs. "Once this happens the bear becomes habituated or conditioned to going after human food because it's just that easy." Such bears can then lead to being repeat offenders, time after time encountering humans. These bears have lost their wildness. They've become nuisance bears that residents dislike because their unnatural actions often lead to property damage or humans fearing their close presence in their urban areas.

Throughout California each summer DFG's officers must answer hundreds of calls about problem bears because people living or camping in bear country fail to play by the bear's rules. "The last thing we want to do is issue a permit to unnecessarily destroy one of these beautiful, wild animals," Mastrup said. "We try as many prevention tactics as possible. But in the end, if people haven't changed their ways, the bears won't either."

The best advice for homeowners and campers who live and enjoy California's wild areas is to remove or pack-up tightly anything that might attract a bear. "People need to be cautious with garbage, dog food, and charcoal grills because bears have a tremendous sense of smell," Mastrup said. "They will also go after these types of food, even when their natural food supply is good."



Photo © Mike Fontaine

Above, bears will forage for natural foods. But human food odor will attract bears who may become habituated to them.

Photo © Jon Kinney



Black bears will eat almost anything. A bear that becomes conditioned to eating dog food left outside for example, or going after a bird feeder on a front porch, can quickly lose its natural aversion to people and become a nuisance or even worse, a threat to humans.

"Bears can become a problem fast," says Ken Nilsson, DFG warden patrol captain in the northern Sierra Nevada. "And once this happens, the bear is guided by its nose." The cycle needs to be broken early, he said. In Auburn, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, a 2-year-old yearling that was a problem bear last fall, was again reported up to its same old tricks this spring. Many bears actually begin exhibiting such bad habits during the previous fall, when they're building up calories for winter in hibernation. This particular bear's sow mother and her cubs were known to raid trash cans in Auburn.

In May, the yearling and even its brother were spotted going into the same Auburn neighborhoods. According to wildlife managers, the bears remembered that there was a lot of food available there. "They have a good memory and are very persistent," Nilsson said. "I'm convinced this bear's a goner because it just keeps going back to easy street. It's a real shame that this one may be destroyed because of us."

Campers and homeowners who leave their food exposed are actually baiting hungry bears. When wildlife officers are called to a home or campsite about a bear problem, they first look at what attracted the bear initially. If they see trash, pet food, bird feeders, grease-encrusted barbecue grills, or other lures, they explain what the homeowner or camper needs to do to prevent future problems.

"Nine times out of 10, it's a people problem," Nilsson

said. And trapping the animal and relocating it to a different mountain area, doesn't break it of the habit. "It's a never-ending problem, the bear will continue to go after human food, no matter where it is," he said. DFG as well as wildlife agencies in other western states do not regularly relocate bears because such a high percentage of them will return to the place where they were trapped.

Each year, as California's bears emerge from their dens after a winter in hibernation they primarily feed on fresh succulent forage and then as summer progresses switch to berries and other natural food crops. Bears by nature are omnivores, meaning they eat both animal and vegetable foods. "Providing bears with human food is like taking the wild out of wildlife," says Doug Updike, DFG wildlife biologist and bear expert.

Coexisting with Bears

California's people and bears are beginning to coexist in areas where rapid growth increasingly pushes the two species together. Drought, leading to failure of a berry or acorn crop may lead to new conflicts, Updike said. "The bottom line is humans have to be responsible for their actions to avoid unwanted bear encounters."

It's up to Californians to learn how to live with wildlife. And when it comes to bears it means being respectful of their wildness. But what can be frustrating is the unwillingness of some residents to abide by DFG's rules on how to avoid attracting bears.

"It really is the motivation of an entire neighborhood to avoid attracting bears," Nilsson said, who for many years has educated the public in the Sierra Nevada about bears. "We go to the same neighborhoods time after

time. Your neighbor may be leaving dog food or garbage out at night, and then the bear breaks into your house. Most people seem to know that they shouldn't let bears get food from them, but then they go ahead and put their trash out two days early. While we're busy informing the public through newspaper and radio programs about being 'bear aware,' the public is busy educating bears about where to find the easy food."

One time a local resident in King's Beach at North Lake Tahoe was in her house when a bear broke in. The woman was trapped because the bear was blocking the only door into her house. So she decided to run into the bathroom, locked the door, and took cover in her bathtub. Then she dialed the local fire department for help, and eventually the bear was removed from her house. Although it's not typical bear behavior to break into a house, if they've been around humans long enough and have a taste for their food, they'll go to incredible lengths, Nilsson said.


"Once bears lose their wariness of people, they continue to come back," he said. "When we get calls, many people are frustrated. Some people want the bear destroyed, others want the bear to be taken away, and we're not in the business of relocating bears or taking them to a zoo."

Bear problems are not unique to California. In Colorado, Division of Wildlife officers dealt with a bear that had a liking for coffee creamer. That bear eluded officers for several weeks breaking into cabins and trailers in search of creamer. Another Colorado bear discovered how to break into campers, and actually took several camper doors right off their hinges. This particular bear burglarized more than 50 campers and trailers in one season. When Colorado's July -August 2002

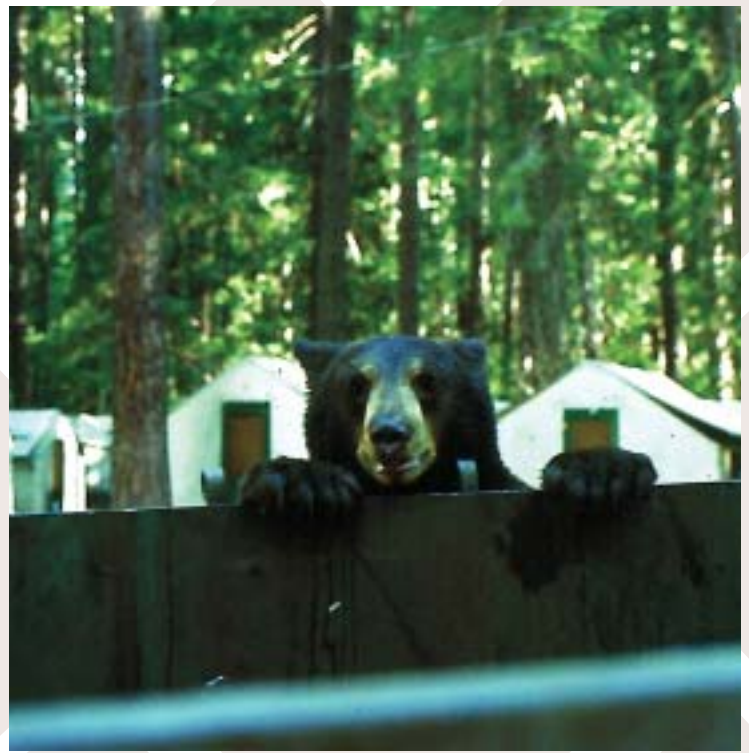
wildlife officers trapped the bear, it weighed more than 500 pounds. Ultimately, they were forced to destroy the animal.

Colorado and California have taken their message about being bear aware a step further than just advising the public on how to avoid encounters. In addition to laws in both states that prohibit people from knowingly feeding big game animals such as bears, several counties have imposed ordinances making it unlawful to leave garbage, trash or other lures left out. People who commit these types of violations are cited by local law enforcement. "In California, these ordinances are highly effective," said Mastrop. "These laws and ordinances are essential if people and bears are going to be able to live in the same areas. If we don't take these steps, then the bears are going to be the losers."

The Lake Tahoe community of Northstar learned that DFG would not relocate bears and the community decided to do something about it. "They were having problems with several bears. The residents didn't want to see the animals killed, so we told them that they would have to be more proactive about not attracting them to their area, and we provided them with educational materials on what to do about bear problems," Nilsson said. The residents went to great lengths to avoid baiting bears. The community purchased bear-proof trash containers, decided to forgo birdfeeders, and began feeding pets inside.

"As a result, we don't hear from Northstar anymore. Thanks to them, bears are no longer a problem there," Nilsson said. "It's a tremendous success story." 

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DFG photos by staff

Human garbage whether in a dumpster or a dump provides easily accessible and unnatural food for bears.

